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Viewpoints

Polygraphs meet the test — and that's the truth

By W. DONALD STEWART

NEVER has so much been said about a subject by so many people who knew so little. Perhaps this article will create a better understanding of the polygraph, misnamed the "lie detector," and its functioning.

The Polygraph

The polygraph is a scientific instrument, costing upward of \$4,000. It measures physiological changes taking place within a person's body as he answers a given question during a polygraph test. A moving graph records any changes in pulse rate, blood pressure, breathing, and electrical conductivity of his skin. These reactions are transmitted to the graph through the polygraph via a cardio cuff wrapped around the upper arm to record pulse-rate and blood-pressure changes; by pneumatic tubes placed on the upper chest and stomach to record breathing changes; and by a sensitive electrode on each of two fingers to record changes in body electrical current known as the galvanic skin response.

No Lie Detector

The polygraph is not a lie detector. Rather, it indicates deception when an examinee answers a question untruthfully or with some reservation. This indicated deception could mean that a person was untruthful in his answer, that he didn't understand a question, or that his mind had wandered. Deception is quickly solved through interview and testing.

Examiner Requirements

Test Reliability

quality of the instrument

ues to improve, as does the ty of examiners. At present, ates have licensing or certification requirements for examiners. The American Polygraph Association (APA), which more or less has set guidelines regarding polygraph examiners, requires that the examiner be trained in an

APA-approved and -inspected school having a minimum course of 260 hours. To become APA members, graduates must pass a three-hour comprehensive test. Most states require an internship period before licensing.

The reliability of polygraph tests currently ranges from 85 percent to 95 percent, according to various surveys.

Admissible Evidence

Polygraph evidence is admissible in many state courts under certain conditions or through stipulation by the attorneys and agreement by the trial judge. Some Federal Judges will allow it, but the U.S. Supreme Court has not yet ruled on admissibility.

"Invasion of Privacy"

Anti-polygraph people raise the invasion-of-privacy issue either from a lack of understanding or possibly as a defense so as not to have to take a polygraph test. Generally, they are concerned about sex-related questions; theft questions; and leaks of classified data. Realistically, data required on an employment application by the U.S. and state governments and by private industry either strips or partially strips a person of his "privacy" at the outset. In states that permit pre-employment polygraphing, the legislators feel that private industry shouldn't have to hire thieves and people who use illegal drugs, which can interfere with job performance. Sex questions are not asked.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has reported that "business executives view employee theft as their most serious crime," that one-third of all business failures result from employee theft, and that losses exceed \$67 billion per year. Therefore, today approximately 20 percent of all major businesses use the polygraph. Half of all commercial banks require a pre-employment polygraph, as do 60 percent of all large retail industries and most U.S. Government agencies involved in sensitive intelligence operations.

The APA and states that require licensing of examiners have not ignored the privacy question. Both have declared religious and racial matters, politics, sex, and union or labor-organization matters off-limits during pre-employment polygraph tests.

A former FBI agent, W. Donald Stewart later served seven years as chief investigator for the Secretary of Defense and then 2½ years as inspector general of the Defense Investigative Service. He operates a private investigation and polygraph business in Miami Beach.

The Pre-Employment

Pre-employment polygraph tests are the ones most often given. The specific test is administered in an effort to resolve a single issue,

usually dealing with a criminal act. A third test given is the periodic test. This test is a follow-up at prescribed — or sometimes unprescribed — times to ensure that an employee has not violated company policy. However, whatever test is afforded, the examinee must first voluntarily execute a waiver of consent for the polygraph examination. Therein it is designated to whom the results will be furnished.

The pre-employment polygraph test consists of about 10 questions that focus primarily on job-related

inquiries such as theft of money or merchandise from a previous employer; falsification of information on the job application; the use of illegal drugs; the use of alcohol during working hours; and previous criminal activities. Prior to the test, each question is reviewed and discussed with the examinee so that he has a complete understanding. If any deception is noted, the matter is discussed with the examinee and, if necessary, that part of the test is repeated. Every effort is made to resolve any deception noted on the test.

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